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## The Representation of the Female Body in the Selected Short Stories of Arupa Patangia Kalita.

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### Abstract

*From literature to digital media, through numerous misleading interpretations, the patriarchal society has quite successfully made the female body an object of control and gaze. The reflection of these oppressions can be found in Arupa Patangia Kalita's short stories. The paper has intended to read the representation of the female body in selected short stories of Kalita namely 'The Girl with Long Hair,' 'Ayengla of the Blue Hills,' 'Kunu's Mother,' and 'The Call Girls at the Shelter Home.' As all the selected short stories have been written of women, for women, and by a woman, the paper has tried to examine whether Kalita's narratives can be called the specimen of 'Écriture Féminine' or not. The paper has mainly adopted textual analysis method to analyse the primary and secondary sources. By analysing the secondary sources various characteristics of the philosophy 'Écriture Féminine' have been found. The stories then have been analysed in respect to these themes to come to the conclusion that they bear synonymity with the said philosophy.*

**Keywords:** Female Body, Patriarchy, Exploitation, Resistance, Écriture Féminine.

### Introduction

From literature to digital media, through numerous misleading interpretations, the patriarchal society has quite successfully made the female body an object of control, and gaze. As

Simone De Beauvoir (2011) in her book writes:

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. (p.330)

Beauvoir says, the female body accepts the patriarchal stereotypes hegemonically and becomes an instrument of their oppression. The societal norms and stereotypes attributed to women act to form the hegemony in their unconscious selves. They accept themselves as 'inferiors' to the superlative masculine body. The female body is thus seen as the 'other,' a commodity under the gaze of her binary companion. *Écriture Féminine* philosophy breaks this 'otherness.' The theory was coined by the French feminist Helene Cixous in her essay, 'The Laugh of Medusa.' She starts her essay by saying:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. A woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and history-by her movement. (Cixous, 1976, p. 886)

Although there are no specified features of the theory, critics generally try to infer the characteristics of '*Écriture Féminine*' through the essays of three French feminists like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. '*Écriture Féminine*' advocates a Write-up that can be written by women, for women, and which can talk about the experiences faced by women. Arupa Patangia Kalita's short stories in that aspect talk about the day-to-day struggles of marginalized rural women. By narrating the patriarchal exploitation she questions society and its misogynistic norms. The paper wishes to examine the representation of the female body in the short stories and whether they can come under the strata of *Écriture Féminine* or not.

## Literature Survey

Very few scholarly articles have been written on the short stories of Arupa Patangia Kalita. Most of the write-ups available online/offline centre around her most famous novel *Felanee*. Manashi Bora (2022) in her article "History, Memory and Trauma in Selected works of Arupa Patangia Kalita" has discussed the themes of insurgency, patriarchal exploitation, and trauma in Kalita's works. But she does it about various stories from collections like *Written in Tears*, *The Musk and Other Stories*, and *The Loneliness of Hira Barua*. As a result, the three short stories selected as our sample have not been discussed in a detailed manner. Shiva Prasad Sharma (2020) in his article "Violence, Memories, Space and the Eternal Urge to Survive: An Analysis of Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee* (2003) and *Written in Tears* (2015)" talks mainly about themes of violence and belongingness through the short stories like 'Arunima's Motherland' and 'The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice.' Farrah Halimatussadyah in her article "An Analysis of *Écriture Féminine* in The Selection Series: The One (2014) Novel" has tried to decode some characteristics of *Écriture Féminine* like the patriarchal system, and bisexual writing through the reference to *The One* novel from the selection series.

## Research Gap

From the above-written discussion, we can conclude that no research has yet been done on how the selected four short stories namely 'The Girl with Long Hair,' 'Ayengla of the Blue Hills,' 'The Call Girls at the Shelter Home,' and 'Kunu's Mother' represents the female body and how they can be discussed from the angle of *Écriture Féminine*.

## Problem Definition

The paper tries to answer the following questions-

1. How Female body has been represented in the short stories of Arupa Patangia Kalita?
2. What are the characteristics of *Écriture Féminine* and how they can be applied in the short stories of Arupa Patangia Kalita?

## Methodology

The paper has adopted mainly textual analysis under the qualitative research methodology to analyse the short stories. Four samples namely 'The Girl with Long Hair,' 'Ayengla of the Blue Hills,' 'The Call Girls at the Shelter Home,' and 'Kunu's Mother' have been chosen as the primary data sources. Two essays of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray respectively 'The Laugh of Medusa' and 'When Our Lips Speak Together' have been consulted as the secondary data sources. The analysis has been done in two parts. At the beginning, the paper has tried to infer the representation of the female body in the short stories. The select essays have been analysed to infer the themes of *Écriture Féminine*. The primary samples at the end have been examined in reference to the themes of *Écriture Féminine* to prove how Kalita's writing can be termed as a specimen of *Écriture Féminine* philosophy.

## Result and Discussion

'The Girl with Long Hair' talks about an adolescent teenage girl Mainao who is the elder child of the family. She is young, cheerful, and loves the company of her friends. Elaborately, the writer describes the feminine qualities of Mainao. She is an expert in sweeping, weaving, and all the household chores. She is obsessed with her long hair. Like any other adolescent young girl, she dreams of having a hero in her life. Her mind sometimes shows her the image of the son of the headmaster. But all these dreams, and youthfulness shatter at the moment the insurgency comes into place. They give guidelines to women about what to do and what not. They restrict her even from going to Durgapuja for which she weaves her lovely dokhna<sup>1</sup>. Instead of all these restrictions, she goes to Durgapuja with her Bengali friends. The community chief in reply orders her to cut her hair and marries her off to a complete stranger. Hair is a symbol of femininity. By cutting it forcefully, the patriarchal society has violated the rights of her body. The hair here symbolizes Mainao's willpower which doesn't easily conform to the patriarchal norms. All these happen in front of a big crowd. At a point, Mainao's clothes come out. Her breasts become visible. No one resists. No one tries to save the girl. Instead, the voyeuristic male gaze travels her body; "Now she was just in her blouse and petticoat even the lower hooks of her red blouse had come off in the struggle. Her breasts, in the new bloom of youth, showed from beneath the torn blouse" (Kalita, 2020, p. 14). As she tries to resist and her hand touches the abuser, society declares it to be a (her) crime. But what about the man who violently drags and cuts off the beautiful hair of a

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1. A traditional costume of the women of Northeast India.

girl without her consent? Her community doesn't see any fault in that man. Rather in the eyes of society, it is Mainao's crime for which she has to go through a lifelong commitment! Even after all these atrocities, society fails to convert Mainao's stiff, firm personality into a passive one. She shows resistance in all the ways possible. When the community chief asks her to kneel and ask for the elder's blessings, she remains stiff; "Someone with a deep voice asked Mainao to kneel and ask for the blessings of the people. But she kept standing as if she had turned into stone" (Kalita, 2020, p. 15).

In 'Ayengla of the Blue House' Kalita intensifies the narration of gender violence. The story revolves around a beautiful, young, happy-go-lucky cheerful woman whose world gets limited to the good well-being of her family. Kalita in this story beautifully amalgamates the myth of the Ayengla who through her beauty brought the sun god on earth with that of Ayengla, the wife of a security guard. The beautiful serene descriptions of the village and the blue hills certainly get replaced by the narration of violence. The metaphor is applicable in Ayengla's life as well. The blue hill, which at the beginning of the story gets narrated as the symbol of her private abode, becomes a symbol of trauma in the second half. On one of her days when she washes a few bedsheets, three or four soldiers drag her from behind and brutally rape her. The memory and the trauma make her a stone for life:

After a week when she returned home, the happy, ever-laughing Ayengla had disappeared, she was now a stone-like person devoid of emotion. Wherever she was told to sit or lie down she would, without any protest, without any response. (Kalita, 2020, p. 29)

Society however thinks of a solution to cure her illness. The body, already impregnated with the memory and trauma of brutal, violent, gang rape gets penetrated by the phallus of her husband to produce children. Some suggested that she would be better off if she had a baby. Someone says, "A baby needs care and she would compel her to come out of her stupor" (Kalita, 2020, p. 29). Instead of treating her trauma, society gifts her more traumas. The solution makes the situation worse. But as her bodily attraction starts fading, she becomes a socially castrated being. Her husband marries another woman. Her tragic situation has been described in the following lines:

Ayengla dragged her cot out from the house into the open space in front. She sat there day and night. Kalita Adds; "Her hair reaching to her hips now has more white than black. Wrinkles have invaded her face. She never talks to anyone; no one tries to talk to her either. (Kalita, 2020, p. 29)

The story is an example of the position of the Female body in society. She has certain values only if she can give pleasure to the patriarchal society. Her body has been reduced to a womb, a child-bearing machine whose emotions, and mental health does not matter at all. The disturbing account of gender violence is visible in the story 'The Call Girls at The Shelter Home' as well. The story shows how during any war the female body becomes the ultimate victim. The story is a narrative of a Chinese village that is invaded by Japanese soldiers. As they start raping the village women (as a part of their ethnic cleansing campaign), the women take shelter in a white woman's refuge camp. The horrific situation of those days has been reflected in the following lines; "They whispered among themselves in fear, concluding that these men had lost the compassion that belongs to a human heart. What remained in their bodies were only the parts

below the waist” (Kalita, 2020, p. 5). The story narrates the experience of U-Lien, an old woman who gets brutally raped by enemy soldiers. During one of their raids, the soldiers do not even spare her. The author questions; “Who could imagine that anybody would lust after her, her body now swollen like a round gourd” (Kalita, 2020, p. 4). The soldiers rape her. The disturbing account of the horror is mentioned in the following lines;

After a while, from his hiding place, he heard a sudden heart-rending cry, as if somebody was slowly butchering a pig with a blunt dao, a big knife. Then there was a gurgling sound from the throat and a long bout of moaning, followed by silence. (Kalita, 2020, p. 5)

The visuals get disturbing in the following lines:

Their blood froze, and their eyes shut in horror at what they saw. Near the small door next to the well, U-Lien’s fat, naked body lay on the grass, lifeless. It bore numerous signs of physical torture; blood had now coagulated in many places. It was obvious that not one, but many men had invaded the poor old woman’s body. (Kalita, 2020, p.5)

In the shelter home, one can see women from various sections of society. But the situation becomes disturbing when seven girls from a brothel come to take shelter there. They become the object of gaze for other women. A woman called Ling Chow even tags them as ‘characterless’ openly. Ling Chow’s curiosity makes her question the reason for their arrival in the Shelter. In reply one of the girls answer, “We know men. But we are unable to recognize these men. These soldiers who have arrived from a foreign land, they are not the kind of men we have known”(Kalita, 2020, p. 5). The line reveals the horrific treatment of the native female body at the hands of the enemy soldiers. For them, the female body has simply been reduced to the vagina which they have to invade at all costs! On one of the nights, these soldiers come in front of the shelter home and threaten the white woman with destroying everything. They ask for negotiation also I. E to give five or six women to fulfil their bodily cravings. The white woman with her shaking voice asks; “is there anyone at all who can save these housewives?” (Kalita, 2020, p. 6). The moment she utters this, she unconsciously constructs a hierarchy. The prostitutes’ body is again reduced to an object which can easily be exploited to save those respectable ‘housewives’ who do not even consider these girls human beings. The girls however do not hesitate. They comb their hair and prepare themselves to sacrifice their bodies for society’s sake. When the hypocritical white woman shows her sympathy and says, ‘God will bless you for this deed’(Kalita, 2020, p. 6), one of the girls replies; ‘Your God doesn’t know us (Kalita, 2020, p. 6). The prostitutes once ignored, gazed for their profession, become a symbol of heroism to Ling Chow but at the cost of their bodies.

‘Kunu’s Mother’ presents the story of a hard-working woman who faces societal oppression for being a single mother. During her teenage years, a so-called handsome man proposes to her at a wedding ceremony and marries her within a month. The man exploits her. The handsome man who speaks to her of being a carpenter and having a house turns out to be a gambler:

When she came to the new place she found that instead of a furniture shop, he owned just a ramshackle shed. The house was a small room squeezed between a row of rented houses. More than working at his carpentry, her husband spent time playing cards with his cronies under the peepul tree. (Kalita, 2019, p. 153)

During her pregnancy one day the man leaves her. She moves on from the pain and works hard to earn bread and butter for her little family. As her daughter grows up she feels the danger of the vultures around their little world. A man one day visits her hut and threatens her of marrying Kunu. Kalita gives an account of the male gaze; “The dress near the thigh where she carried the pitcher, had lifted slightly revealing her white skin. Perspiration and water made her skin look like a smooth banana leaf with water drops. The man was looking at her without blinking” (Kalita, 2019, p. 158). Threatened by the gaze of the man, She immediately sends Kunu to a relative’s house. But in reply, the man visits her hut with his whole gang. Kunu’s mother with the chopping boti2 comes outside and faces the crowd. They start destroying her little world. They take chickens from her coop. They also threaten her with packing her bag and sending her off; “This is our land. If we want we can throw you away”( Kalita, 2019, p. 162). A crowd gathers to watch the atrocities. But no one shows any resistance. Kunu’s mother keeps fighting the demons till her last breath. The story shows how a female body is treated like a commodity in the gaze of patriarchy. They can use and throw the body (as in the case of Kunu’s mother) like an object without understanding the deep emotion the body possesses. Women like Mainao, Ayengla, U-Lien, prostitutes, and Kunu’s mother are the victims of this patriarchal exploitation. Patriarchy incorporates its hungry claws by penetrating the phallus into these bodies. Instead of all the atrocities the bodies still fight.

This spirit however becomes a specimen of *Écriture Féminine*. The stories bear many other characteristics of *Écriture Féminine*. *Écriture Féminine* is a philosophy that tries to break the conventional phallogocentric discourse in the domain of writing. Although the theory is very popular in the field of ‘body studies,’ there is no such written document where the readers can find the features of this philosophy. Half of the features mentioned below in this paper have been inferred from the two essays namely ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ and ‘Our Two Lips Speak Together’ written by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray respectively.

## Experimental

*Écriture féminine* is an experimental practice. It speaks for the bodies which have been silenced and oppressed for ages by the phallogocentric discourse. In the short stories, we can see characters belonging to rural areas. The protagonists are housemaids, housewives, and prostitutes who generally play side characters in popular or mainstream literature and media. *Écriture Féminine* also advocates the ethics of difference. We live in a world where from language to food- everything is phallogocentric. From our childhood we are taught to perceive masculinity as the subject and femininity as the ‘other’ or object. As a result we get propagated by the norms of patriarchy and learn to inhabit the world in masculine way. We are never taught the feminine perspective of seeing things. And we ask ‘what do women want?’ Eminent French feminist Luce Irigaray’s works focus on this topic. Her works do not associate male with something aggressive or women with victim. She never tries to equalize the male and female entity. Rather She celebrates the difference. Her seminal essay ‘When Our Two Lips Speak Together,’ collected from her magnum opus ‘This sex which is not one’ advocates this ethics of difference. In the short stories, Kalita celebrates this difference. Kalita through her poetic voice narrates female bodies who are experts in household works. She elaborately explains how the characters can neatly mop the floor, can cook delicious food items, or weave like artists.



## Plurality of Voices

Écriture féminine advocates plurality. Luce Irigaray in her essay ‘When Our Lips Speak Together,’ says, “we must invent so many different voices to speak all of ‘us,’ including our cracks and faults.... We have so many dimensions” (Irigaray and Burke, 1980, p. 75). Kalita’s short stories chiefly adhere to this rule. In ‘The Call Girls at the Shelter Home’ she has shown how there is a hierarchy among the women. Also, her stories are not about a single ‘her’ but rather ‘them.’ These short stories include all kinds of women- the good and the bad.

## Celebration of the Feminine Emotions

Écriture féminine delves deep into the emotional aspect of both the writer and her characters. It rejects the principles of rationality and logic fostered by the masculine symbolic order, traditional concepts of progression, and the conventional subordination of the body and mind. It follows a non-linear narrative structure. It advocates fluidity. In the story itself, we can see how the writer has explored the emotional aspects of the women. In ‘Kunu’s Mother’ or ‘Ayengla of the Blue House’ the narrative structure oscillate between the past and present. Kalita at one point describes a certain myth and then indulges in the thought process of her characters.

## Against Patriarchy

Écriture féminine talks against patriarchy. In all the selected four stories, one can see how patriarchy exploits the female body. It disrupts her natural flow. In all four stories primary emphasis has been laid on the experiences of the female bodies and how they react to those ideas. The stories are written by a woman, of women, and for women. Thus, these stories are the specimen of *Ecriture Feminine*.

## Celebration of Orality

Écriture féminine focuses on a language that expresses the ineffable, the marginalized. Kalita’s short story abides by this rule also because it picks up various folk tales as metaphors for her stories. The duality of bourgeoisie – proletariats, white-black, powerful-powerless distinctions exists in literature also. Here the written word becomes the phallus as the black ink penetrates the white page. The black ink thus symbolizes phallus. On the other hand, the white page becomes the castrated symbol because it is void. Oral stories on that note symbolise the powerless, the marginalized. Kalita has incorporated various folk tales like ‘Asagi-Baisagi and Chandrabao’s’ tale or ‘Ayengla and the Sun god’s tale. While the Asagi-Baisagi story has been used as a satire to comment on society’s conservatism during Mainao’s tragic end, ‘Ayengla and the Sun god’s tale’ has been used to describe Ayengla’s thought process. By picking up oral fables and giving them feminine dimensions, Kalita proves herself to be a true practitioner of *écriture féminine*.

## Use of Disruptions

Écriture féminine is marked by the disruptions in the text- gaps, silences and puns. It is personal and engaging. It is poetic. In the story, we see how Kalita often breaks the fourth wall and directly communicates with her readers.

## Stream of Consciousness

Écriture feminine doesn't abide by the rule of linearity. It advocates fluidity. Kalita's stories are written in a stream-of-consciousness technique. It has a more feminine structure and tone. Rather than telling a story in a linear tone, Kalita emphasizes the thought process of her characters. Thus the narration jumps from the description of the neat, clean dreamy hut to the childhood, marriage, struggle, and exploitations of Kunu's mother. Kalita continuously breaks the linear flow by introducing descriptive images and folk stories.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper was to examine the representation of the female body in the selected short stories and their association with the French philosophy 'Écriture Féminine.' Each story selected in this paper talks about the stories of women from various age groups. All of them are the victims of phallogentric patriarchal oppressions. A teenage girl's innocent wish to roam with her friends has given her the punishment of marrying a stranger, more specifically one of her abusers. Her long, lustrous hair has been cut, her clothes have been torn to give message the community what can happen if one goes against the patriarchal dictum. A happy-go-lucky homemaker Ayengla's body has been raped by some soldiers and after the incident instead of treating the mental trauma her body has been impregnated with her husband's phallus. The young prostitutes who fly to the shelter home to save themselves from the monstrous sexual cravings of the enemy soldiers, are requested to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of the women of the respectable families. Kunu's mother has to change her little dreamy hut just because of being a single mother of a beautiful adolescent girl!

Instead of all these atrocities, the women in Kalita's narratives stay strong. They keep on fighting the oppressions of patriarchy till their last breath. In reply to the patriarchy's violence they keep on writing their bodies. This is the spirit of Écriture Féminine. Kalita's writing this way becomes the specimen of 'Écriture Féminine.'

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